

What does it mean to research contemporary fiction in a university? How are academics working in this field different from enthusiasts, given that the latter group is often so knowledgeable? And what sorts of contemporary fiction do we actually study in institutions of learning?

These questions, and others related to it, sit at the heart of Robert Eaglestone's "Contemporary fiction in the academy: Towards a manifesto", published in the literary-studies journal *Textual Practice* in 2013. Although, as Eaglestone points out, such questions have haunted contemporary literary studies throughout its existence, back to the 1890s at Yale. Among the problems Eaglestone raises, a couple stand out for me: the difficulties of selecting from the "archive" of contemporary fiction; and the challenge of working with living authors, publishers and agents. The former is a question of which texts we can study – for, as the archive is constantly growing, there appears to be no systematic approach to the selection of novels for study. By contrast, the latter is a problem of authority. Much academic literary criticism veers away from ascribing authorial intention and instead focuses on how a literary work can be read – but even then, a living author may step in and decry a piece of literary critical work (although this happens less frequently than might be supposed). Broadly speaking, these are the difficulties of writing what Eaglestone calls the "contemporary history of the book".

Such challenges have been at the forefront of my mind ever since I discovered that David Mitchell's [Cloud Atlas is actually made up of two separate and quite different textual versions](#). Mitchell's book was "orphaned" at the US publishing house when his editor left the company, meaning that changes to the UK edition were never synchronized back into that version. Then, when David Ebershoff joined the publisher, he suggested a series of substantial edits to a single chapter of Mitchell's novel, which resulted in a very different text. Textual variance of this nature is hardly new for literary studies. It is the bread and butter of much work done by medievalist scholars, for example. It also happens far more often with fiction in the present day than is readily admitted, although studies of such differences are relatively rare. (One example is a forthcoming work from Erik Ketzan and Christof Schöch that highlights the differences between the versions of Andy Weir's novel *The Martian* (2011). Much could also be said about the typographical differences between versions of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2011): some feature colouration; others use superscript, for emphasis). The best part of investigating this matter in Mitchell's novel, though, was the discovery that the passage that differs most between the two versions is about the preservation of an archive.

To recap: in Mitchell's SF world, the "fabricant" Sonmi ~451 has been sentenced to death for her role in a conspiracy to overthrow the future state. As the narrative progresses (spoiler warning), it emerges that the entire plot was a set-up designed to strengthen the government's position. This part of *Cloud Atlas* takes the form of an interview with an "archivist", whose role is to create a record for "historians yet unborn" – at least in one version of the novel. The duplicitous state is conducting a show trial, hiding the truth behind a veil of false justice. But *Cloud Atlas* also seems to play with this at the level of its own publication history. In other words, it is possible to interpret the novel by interpreting the differences between its two texts.

But what about for Mitchell himself? He didn't actually intend to publish two versions of the novel; that was a result of an unfortunate publishing process which exceeded his "faff-tolerance threshold". So, Mitchell told me, one couldn't really call this a "trans-textual game". As I say, this is one of the benefits but also the difficulties of working with authors who are living and willing to communicate: they have an authority over the work and its reception. At the [Centre for Contemporary Literature](#) at Birkbeck, we are no strangers to such incursions. We have had events where authors – including Tom McCarthy, Jennifer Egan and Siri Hustvedt – have attended entire days of academic panels about their works. Indeed, I know first-hand just how nerve-racking it can be to speak about an author's work with the author sitting in the front row. But I'd say that literary scholars need to think more about this type of "contemporary history of the book" if we are to understand the ways in which contemporary literature enters circulation. We also need to incorporate such differences into our interpretative practices. For what can "close reading" actually mean if we do not even notice such textual divergence?